

## Defending the Revolution: human rights in post-election Iran

Written by Bernd Kaussler

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BERND KAUSSLER, JUN 30 2009

As much as the presidential election and its violent aftermath will remain a reference point to most Iranians and reformist politicians of how blatantly the rule of law and their human rights were violated, so will it continue to inform the mindset and policies of what now could be best described as the ruling hardliner elite of the Islamic Republic.

By and large, as far as the rule of law and human rights are concerned, 12 June marked a watershed event in post-revolutionary Iran. In a rather blatant, or in fact, clumsily executed attempt to free themselves from partisan politics and an ever-burgeoning movement promoting democracy and human rights, the Principalist faction of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, hardliner clerics, elements within the security and military establishment and the Supreme Leader himself purportedly usurped the elections and granted themselves another term. Whilst irregularities before and during the elections point to election fraud, the Iranian government continues to blame Western governments and media for instigating the demonstrations. It is curious, yet, perfectly inline with the Iranian nomenclature's *modus operandi* that evidently unable to provide evidence that the elections were in fact fair and free, the government focuses on this major propaganda offensive. This is not so much diverting attention from dealing with the allegations of fraud, but in fact, legitimizing current and future human rights abuses.

Reaffirming earlier accusations by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about "foreign plots" in the country, Iran's Intelligence Minister, Gholamhoseyn Mohseni-Ezhe'i, charged Britain and the US, in a long televised interview, for "promoting a soft overthrow" in Iran. These accusations sound as preposterous as the public recantations and confessions by alleged protesters seem poorly staged and simply offensive to millions of Iranians.

Just as one was tempted to compare the mass protests in the streets in Iranian cities, the mantras shouted by the crowds and the rhetoric used by opposition leaders to the events of 1979, so is one now reminded of the immediate period after the Islamic Revolution succeeded. On a smaller scale, what we are witnessing now recalls the mass arrests and summary executions of the early revolutionary years when Khamenei and his standard-bearer purged political enemies and former allies alike from the political scene.

Unlike 1979, in 2009, there was too much at stake for the regime to make concessions or compromises on the status quo. Thirty years ago, the royal elite and bourgeoisie refused to either die or kill excessively for the Shah, but rather followed their money trail to Europe and the United States. Today, there seemed to have been few expedient alternatives for the regime but to violently crack down against protesters and intimidate and arrest high profile figures from the opposition.

In fact, had Khamenei bowed to public pressure, it may have well eroded one of the basic pillars of the entire political system. Had the Supreme Leader allowed another round of election or in fact appointed Mousavi, he would have effectively admitted to massive election fraud.

Thus, for a regime, whose political survival relies heavily on popular acquiescence and now virtually lacks any legitimacy in the eyes of its own people and the international community alike, the *raison d'état* for the next four years (or even longer) is likely to be defined by political violence. Seen through the prism of human rights, the June 2009

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elections represented the culmination for the struggle of rights and the rule of law on the part of reformist politicians and society at large. For hardliner elements in the clergy and government, post-election violence is meant to put an end to the human rights and democratization discourse, which had really started in 1979, but had gained tremendous momentum since Mohammad Khatami was elected president in 1997.

The brutality used in the streets serves as much as an indiscriminate purge of a burgeoning civil-society as it is a means of deterrence to political and clerical dissenters in Tehran and Qom. As far as hardliners in government and the judiciary are concerned, by framing the demonstrations and allegations of fraud within a national security context, mass arrests are as justified as state-sponsored violence by militia groups is being carried out with impunity. Those who have been detained will either face no trial and be detained indefinitely or a stand before a revolutionary court, which will be held in secret and with no evidence being brought forward. Even more so than offences against the sacred, charges of “endangering national security in Iran” (what alleged crimes fall within this category has been subject to the judiciary’s arbitrary interpretation), have always been dealt with outside parameters of universal human rights. As the regime continues to paint the demonstrations as a foreign-funded plot against the Islamic Republic, so will the human rights situation deteriorate dramatically.

Not all is lost however. When Ali Khamenei sided with Ahmadinejad and legitimized the use of force against protesters during his infamous 19 June Friday prayer sermon, his words heralded a new chapter in Iranian politics and exacerbated the already serious crisis of legitimacy. By doing so, the Supreme Leader cast off his cloak as neutral arbiter between factions and created a new demarcation line between the establishment and marginalized reformists. This move as well as the increasing political and economic clout which the Revolutionary Guards have received under Ahmadinejad’s tenure has alienated a number of political and clerical heavyweights, who now, more than ever before have been sidelined from the inner sanctum of Iranian politics. Numerous senior clerics have come out and defended the protests as well as publicly criticized what they consider a dramatic shift in the system towards authoritarianism.

Lacking any substantial support from Qom, and more importantly responding to calls for rights and democracy with more human rights abuses is bound to stir up an even greater crisis. It remains to be seen how sustainable the elite’s penchant for political violence will be in the long term. In the immediate future, however, Iranians will continue to pay a high price for standing up for their rights.

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